

Flowers Never Bend With the Rainfall

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Flowers Never Bend With the Rainfall

by [PennyLane](#)

Summary

Human AU. Arthur is the owner of a book shop in London, stuck in a troubling and sometimes abusive relationship. Alfred is the young photographer who ducks into the shop one day to get out of the rain.

Alfred F. Jones first met Arthur Kirkland on a rainy Saturday afternoon in London. He'd been on his bike, just riding idly around London, on the look-out for interesting or quirky photo opportunities, because you never knew where or when you might come across the next awesome photograph. So far he'd come up dry this day, and now he was going to be coming up soaking wet as the skies above suddenly opened up and a cold, hard rain began falling.

"Crap." Looking around, he found himself in front of a bookstore, which was thankfully open. Could be worse, he thought, as he hurriedly chained his bike and grabbed his camera bag. It could have been a tea shop.

A little bell overhead tinkled as he pushed through the door, and he grimaced as cold rain dripped from his hair and slid under his sweatshirt. He may have been a little enthusiastic in his entry, kind of tumbling through in his haste to get out of the rain, and the man sitting at an old oak desk at the front looked up in alarm.

Alfred felt himself caught and held by a pair of very green eyes, possibly the greenest eyes he'd ever seen, and as a portrait photographer, he'd seen his share. "Ah, hi," he said.

"Hello. May I help you? Or..." The man raised a very impressive eyebrow as he looked past Alfred to the rain outside, "are you simply seeking sanctuary from our weather?"

He had a nice voice, very British, and kind of husky. Alfred offered his most winning grin, "Both? You can help me, if you let me wait out the rain." Then the effect was ruined as rain dripped from his hair and trickled down his face and he realized his glasses were steaming up.

"Tsk," the man said, rising from his seat. "Better get over there by the radiator while I get you a towel. You'll catch your death."

Alfred couldn't help grinning to himself as the man walked through the store and he took up a place by the indicated radiator. For someone who looked so young – possibly only a few years older than he was – he talked a little like a fussy old man. It was kind of cute.

The green-eyed man was back promptly and held out a towel. "Here, use that on your hair. You're dripping all over my floor."

"Thanks." Alfred applied the towel to his hair, rubbing briskly. When he'd gotten all the water out that he thought he could, he held the wet towel, unsure what to do with it. But the man took it from his hands and draped it neatly over the radiator, then surprisingly, pulled a folded, white handkerchief from his pocket and held it out.

When Alfred blinked at it, the other man explained, "For your glasses."

"Oh. Thank you." Who carried around nice, folded handkerchiefs these days? Alfred was positively charmed. While he cleaned his glasses, the other man went back to his desk and whatever paperwork he'd been working on. Placing his cleaned glasses on his nose, Alfred unthinkingly tucked the damp handkerchief into his pocket. "Do you mind if I look around?"

Alfred saw the other man's lips twitch even though he didn't look up from his paperwork. "This is a shop," he said mildly. "And we do encourage browsing."

"Awesome." Alfred was going to ask if he carried comic books, but decided this really didn't look like the kind of place that did that, and the owner didn't look like the type that would appreciate the question. So he started wandering around. It was an older building with a nice feel to it, all warm wood and nooks and crannies, and there were books neatly crammed into every corner. And it was a used book shop, which was even better. Alfred wasn't one to settle down with a thick book on his lap (he much preferred a comic book or his play station), but even he had to admit there was something wonderfully comforting about the smell of old, well cared for books. This wasn't like the Waterstone's he often frequented, with its rows and rows of shiny covers. Many of these books had old leather covers, and the pages in the books were thick and dotted with age.

There was a very impressive children's book section with some titles Alfred recognized, but the covers were all more colorful and ornate than he had ever seen before. His fingers itched to pick up the copy of Peter Pan that was displayed on a small table, but from the price he was reasonably sure it must be a first edition. But, oh how he wanted to see those Arthur Rackham illustrations as they would have first appeared.

"You can pick it up."

Alfred clutched his chest and spun around. "Dude! Make some noise next time."

"Terribly sorry. I wasn't trying to startle you."

"No, no, it's okay. I guess I was just lost in thought." Alfred indicated the Peter Pan. "Can I really...?"

"Of course. Just be gentle with it."

Alfred grinned. "Okay, I won't bend any corners or write in the margins." Green eyes widened in alarm, and Alfred said hurriedly, "Kidding! Just kidding." He picked up the book and carefully opened the cover. "I just really wanted to see the illustrations."

"Ah, you're a Rackham fan."

"You could say," Alfred replied, carefully turning pages. "He's pretty awesome."

"Indeed. I find his work utterly enchanting." Alfred looked up at that, and the man flushed as if he thought he'd said something silly.

"That's it exactly," Alfred agreed, smiling. "And he totally did it first, which makes it even more awesome."

The other man smiled back. "Quite so." They stood looking at one another for a moment longer than might be considered polite for two strangers, and the other man looked away first. "Well, I'll leave you to your browsing then." And he turned and walked back to the front of the store. Alfred took a moment to admire his slim, compact figure, wishing he could

have found some way to keep the man talking for a while longer. Then he sighed, and turned back to the book and for a while lost himself in leafing through its pages.

The bell tinkled several more times as he wandered through the shop and customers came and went, but he was too lost in his browsing to pay them any attention. He had discovered a small section devoted to vintage photography and was looking through the titles, when he stopped and caught his breath, staring at the shelf in front of him.

Alfred carefully laid the book down in front of the green-eyed man at the desk. "Dude. You've got a first edition of *Les Américains*," he said in a hushed voice.

The man studied the cover of the book in front of him for a moment. "So I do," he said slowly. He opened the cover and frowned at it for a moment, then his face cleared. "Ah, the photography section." He looked up at Alfred with an apologetic expression, "I bought most of that collection from an estate sale. I'm afraid I don't know a great deal about them."

"Well, the first thing you should know, is that you've got this way underpriced." Then Alfred blinked and held up a hand, saying hurriedly, "But I shouldn't have told you that because I am totally buying this book."

"I appreciate your honesty," the other man said dryly, "and I shan't be changing the price. I'll sell it for what I've marked it for. If you've looked at it, you can see it isn't in fine condition."

"Oh, that's good then, and it's in plenty fine condition for me," Alfred grinned, relieved. He would have paid more for it, but he was glad he didn't need to. He traced a finger lightly around the edge of the cover, and offered hesitantly, "You said you didn't know much about this book. Would you like to know more?"

This time, the man offered an actual smile instead of a mere twitch of his lips. "I never turn down an opportunity to learn about books."

"Awesome." Alfred stuck out his hand. "Alfred F. Jones."

Standing, the other man accepted his hand in a firm grip. "Arthur Kirkland. Why don't you have a seat, Mr. Jones."

Alfred wrinkled his nose as he sat. "Alfred, please."

"All right. Alfred." The man was gazing at Alfred again, green eyes peering at him from under his messy, blond hair, but then seemed to shake himself out of his thoughts. "Would you like some tea? I was just about to put the kettle on."

Alfred would have dearly loved a cup of coffee, but, like comic books, he doubted that was on offer here, so he smiled and said that would be great, perfect, just what he needed on this chilly, wet day. It was worth the lie when the other man beamed and left to get the tea.

They passed a very pleasant couple of hours there at the front of the store, and Alfred managed to drink the tea while distracting Arthur every time the man tried to interest him in

some of his scones, which all looked like small brown rocks. They were interrupted sporadically by customers, and a lot of the people coming in seemed to be regulars; Arthur called them by name or had books ready for them to pick up. It seemed he also did some minor restoration, repairing bindings in a workshop at the back, which Alfred found damned impressive. It only took him about twenty minutes to tell Arthur about *Les Américains* and why it was such an important, important book in the art of photography, and why Alfred admired it so. The rest of the time was taken up with a variety of subjects that just seemed to come up in their conversation and ranged from antique maps (one of Arthur's passions) to the occult (Arthur had quite the section on the occult tucked away in his shop and he seemed to know an awful lot about it), comic books (Alfred may have gone on a bit longer than was polite on the subject, but Arthur was woefully uneducated in how awesome they were), to the whys and wherefores of Alfred making his home in London, and his photography. It was only after Arthur apologetically told him it was time to close shop and he had an appointment, did Alfred realize he'd learned very little about Arthur himself.

It was dusk outside by now, and had thankfully stopped raining. His purchase was carefully wrapped and handed over, and then he and Arthur just stood there, looking at each other across the desk. "Well," Alfred said brightly, "thanks for the sanctuary – and the book."

"Thank you for the purchase – and the information on Mr. Frank. If I ever find another first edition of his, I will certainly price it properly."

"Ha ha. Glad to help." Alfred shuffled his feet, oddly reluctant to leave this cozy little bookshop and its owner, but the man was obviously waiting for him to leave so he could lock up and go on to his appointment. "Well, thanks again." He hugged his purchase and camera bag to him and gave a little wave.

"Come back any time," Arthur said, and he sounded as if he meant it.

As Alfred unlocked his bike and prepared to ride away, he thought back to the expression on Arthur's face, and maybe it was wishful thinking on his part, but he thought the man might have looked a little wistful when he invited him to come back. Before he pushed off on his bike, he looked up at the storefront to see the name, and grinned: Kirkland's. Compact and straightforward, much like the man he'd just met.

Sundays were always busy days at his studio. It seemed it was the perfect day for mothers to dress up their children and bring them for a portrait, or bully the whole family into a studio to be photographed. Alfred was great with the kids and he got good results, and word of mouth kept bringing new business to his door. He enjoyed working with children, who found him great fun, and the mothers liked his all-American looks and bright smile, and, well, the work paid the bills and paid well. But Alfred put his hours in at the studio so he could afford to follow his passion. And his passion was to capture what he considered real life on film, not staged portraits in a studio.

So he spent this Sunday the way he had spent so many others, and charmed children and their mothers, all while thinking of the green-eyed bookstore owner he'd met yesterday and how he wanted to see him again.

That evening, he went to meet his cousin, Matthew, and Matt's boyfriend, Gilbert, for drinks. It wasn't their usual pub, but it was a place Gilbert apparently liked, so he was happy to give it a try. The pub was warm, crowded and noisy, just the way he liked them, and Alfred stopped at the bar to get his drink before slipping through the milling people, looking for Matt. He spotted a waving arm at a table near the back, and he made his way over. Matthew and Gilbert were sitting on one side, their chairs close together – still in that snuggly phase of their new relationship – and there was someone else at the table with them, but all Alfred could see was his back...and a thatch of messy blond hair. He reached the table just as Arthur Kirkland looked up, and his green eyes widened in shock.

“Alfred?”

“Arthur!”

Matthew and Gilbert looked from one to the other. “You two know one another?” Matthew asked, obviously surprised.

Alfred grinned happily, his spirits rising with each moment. “We met yesterday at his shop.” He slid into the chair opposite Arthur. “I bought a first edition Robert Frank from him,” he beamed.

Matthew gave a little sigh. “You do realize I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“Doesn't matter, cuz. All you need to know is that I totally scored.” And here he was sitting across from the guy who had been filling his thoughts all day.

“And it was the awesome me who got us all together here tonight.” Gilbert raised his glass of beer. “Here's to me.” When everyone looked at him, collective eyebrows raised, he added, “And to small worlds.”

Alfred waved a hand between Gilbert and Arthur. “So, how do you two know each other?”

“Gilbert and I were in school together. We met when my family moved to London.” Arthur looked at Gilbert, frowning a little. “We must have been, what, eleven? Twelve?”

“Around then. Long time.”

Arthur turned back to Alfred. “And you're Matthew's cousin? I only just met Matthew.” He looked at Matthew and then back to Alfred, eyebrows raised. “You two have a very strong family resemblance.”

“Oh yeah, don't we? Most people think we're brothers. Oh! Here, I almost forgot.” Alfred reached into his back pocket and pulled out the re-folded handkerchief he'd put there for the next time – and he had determined there would be a next time – he saw Arthur. “I wanted to give this back to you, and thanks again.”

Even in the dim lighting of the pub, Alfred could see Arthur's blush as he accepted the handkerchief. “Oh, well, you didn't have to return this. But, you're welcome.”

Matthew and Gilbert were watching the exchange with open curiosity. When no explanation was forthcoming, Gilbert nudged Arthur with his elbow. "While Francis is away, the mice will play, eh?"

Arthur swatted his arm away with a scowl. "Shut it, Gil."

"Francis?" Alfred asked, trying to ignore the sudden sick little feeling inside him.

Arthur raised his eyes, and he looked apologetic. "My boyfriend," he said quietly.

That little sick feeling settled in his stomach and made itself at home. "Oh. Right." He didn't miss how Arthur was gripping his glass so tightly his knuckles were white, or how Gilbert was suddenly looking elsewhere, or how Matthew was giving him an openly sympathetic look. Wow, he must be really obvious tonight. So he squared his shoulders, grinned brightly and raised his glass. "So, here's to new friends."

Immediately, Arthur seemed to relax, and he raised his own glass with a smile tinged with relief. "To new friends." The others joined the toast, but as they drank Alfred could see something like regret in his new friend's green eyes.

They spent the next couple of hours nursing their drinks and getting acquainted. Alfred learned more about Arthur from Gilbert in a half hour than he had from Arthur in their time at the bookstore. Gilbert seemed rather proud of his friend and bragged about how the bookstore had been Arthur's dream and how hard he'd worked to make it a reality. He also learned more than he wanted to know about Francis Bonnefoy, Arthur's boyfriend. He was French, a rather well-known restaurant critic, and he traveled a good deal for his job. It also wasn't hard to pick up that Gilbert hated his guts, although he didn't actually say that. Rather, it was more the expression on his face whenever Arthur talked about him. Alfred decided to press Matt on it later. His Canadian cousin was quiet and content to stay in the background, to the extent that people could forget he was actually there, but unlike Alfred, he was sensitive to undercurrents and he didn't miss much. So if there was anything to know, he would know it.

"Well, it's been fun, but Matt and I have someplace else to be tonight," Gilbert announced, setting his empty glass down on the table with finality. "So, we'll see you two." He poked Arthur's shoulder as he stood, his arm around Matthew. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Good *night*, Gil," Arthur said firmly.

"I'll call you tomorrow, Al."

"Later, Matt."

Then Arthur and Alfred were left alone at the small table. Arthur's eyebrows were scrunched together as he stared into his drink. Just when Alfred opened his mouth to speak, Arthur looked up. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "If I said or did anything to lead you to believe... yesterday at the shop..."

"No, no, no, you didn't, really."

Arthur didn't look convinced; in fact, he looked guilty as hell, so Alfred shrugged and offered a little grin. "I was hoping, that's all. Can't say I'm not disappointed."

Again, Arthur's cheeks darkened as he blushed. "That's – that's, well." He coughed and took a drink of his beer.

That only made Alfred's grin widen. "Did you mean what you said yesterday, about me coming back anytime?"

"Of course," Arthur said immediately. "I quite enjoyed our chat." Then he bit his lip. "But now that you know I'm involved with someone, I don't imagine you would want –"

"Hey." Alfred stopped him with a light touch to his wrist. "That doesn't mean we can't be friends, right?"

Arthur's eyes widened, and it made Alfred's heart dance a little lighter to see the disbelief turn to relief in their green depths.

"No, of course not," Arthur said, and he smiled.

Arthur balanced himself near the top of the ladder and stretched until the tips of his fingers touched the box he needed. Having such high ceilings gave him storage space on the very tops of the floor to ceiling shelves, but it also made life a bit difficult when he actually needed something he'd stored up there. He heard the bell tinkle out front and muttered, "Oh, bugger." Well, they would just have to wait. There was no way to hurry this.

"Yo, Artie! You here?"

Arthur rolled his eyes, but couldn't stop the pleased smile that touched his lips. Since that first evening at the pub, Alfred had stopped by regularly – or rather, irregularly. He came by at least once a week, sometimes twice, but at never the same time or same day, so Arthur never knew when to expect him. But he found himself looking up with anticipation every time the door opened. "Back here, Alfred."

He heard Alfred talking to someone at the front of the shop, then footsteps, then a hushed curse. In the next moment, the unsteady ladder suddenly stabilized. "Holy crap, Arthur. You trying to give me a heart attack?"

"That wasn't my intention, no. But, thank you. That's much better."

"Yeah, I guess it is, as it isn't about to *fall over*."

"Alfred, I have done this a hundred times," Arthur said calmly, balancing a box on his shoulder as he descended the ladder. "It's perfectly safe as long as I'm careful. And I'm always careful." Still, he was always glad to get his feet back on the floor, although he wouldn't tell Alfred that.

Alfred looked up at the boxes tucked away nearly out of sight. “So do you need anything else from up there? Because I’ve got a longer reach than you do, so if you need anything...”

“No, this was all I needed, but thank you. Is there a customer out front?”

Alfred gave him a bright smile. “Yep. Well, kind of. I brought a friend by to meet you. He’s looking for something in particular, and I thought you might be able to help him. Come on.” He grabbed Arthur lightly by the wrist and tugged him along after him. Honestly, sometimes the American could be like a hyperactive toddler. But Arthur found himself looking forward to his visits and the time they spent together possibly more than he should, considering he was in a committed relationship with someone else. Still, he refused to feel guilty about it. Francis had a wide circle of friends involved in the culinary field that he spent time with without Arthur, and Arthur was now re-learning what it was like to have a circle of friends he could enjoy while Francis was on one of his many trips out of town. It hadn’t always been like that. Arthur had a number of friends he socialized with when he met Francis, but one by one they had lost touch. Gilbert, who was never one to mince words with him, had told him quite frankly it was because Francis was a snob and an ass, and he made Arthur’s friends feel uncomfortable with his snotty attitude. Most of Arthur’s friends couldn’t even afford to eat in the type of places Francis reviewed, and it was true Francis could be a bit of a diva, so Arthur accepted that they didn’t particularly want to socialize with him.

Thank goodness Gilbert was impervious to any sort of sly insult Francis tried out on him. Oh, he knew he was being insulted; he just didn’t give a good damn. He was Arthur’s oldest friend and he seemed to take some sort of pleasure in annoying Francis with his presence at every opportunity, and as much as he loved Francis, Arthur had to admit, sometimes it was rather entertaining.

“Arthur, this is Kiku Honda. Kiku, this is Arthur Kirkland, the guy I’ve been telling you about.”

Arthur held out his hand, smiling at the young Japanese man at the front of his store. “It’s Arthur. And don’t believe a word he’s told you.”

The man smiled and accepted his hand in a firm shake. “And I am Kiku. He has actually said some very complimentary things about you, Arthur-san.”

“In that case, he must have been telling the truth for a change,” Arthur said smoothly, as Alfred squawked in protest.

“Hey, I brought you a potential customer *and* refreshments *and* my own awesome self.” Alfred indicated the cups and box on the table, beaming.

Arthur recognized the logo on the cups and box from the expensive little bakery a few blocks away that he and Alfred had walked to one afternoon, and he raised his eyebrows. “What is all this in aid of?” He smiled at Alfred. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“I told Kiku about your shop and your maps. His cousin has a birthday coming up, and he collects old maps, so Kiku was hoping he could find something here.”

“I really don’t know anything about antique maps,” Kiku said, “and Alfred said I could trust you to help me choose something authentic and appropriate.”

“And not get ripped off,” Alfred added.

“Oh.” Arthur was both touched and gratified. “Well, there’s much to consider and I have quite a collection, so this may take a while.”

“Thus the refreshments,” Alfred said cheerfully. “Also why we came near closing time, so you could close the shop and you guys could take your time.”

“Brilliant. Well, then, let me put the sign up, and we can get started. If you’ll tell me a little about your cousin, Kiku, and what you know of his collection, I’m sure we can find something suitable.”

And that was how Arthur met Kiku, and soon he was part of his circle of friends as well.

“So, tell me again about these friends of yours we’re to have drinks with this evening?”

Arthur buttoned his sweater vest and looked over his shoulder to where Francis was choosing a shirt from his wardrobe. He’d already told him about the group, but he did so again, finishing with, “And, of course, you know Gilbert.”

“Yes,” Francis answered, with a long-suffering sigh, “I do.”

Arthur walked over to him, laying his hands on his shoulders and smoothing out the material of his expensive shirt. “You don’t mind, do you? It’s only for a couple of hours, and I do want them to meet you.”

“*Non*, it’s fine, Arthur. I’m glad you’re getting out and have friends of your own. You spend much too much time in that dusty shop of yours.”

“It’s not dusty,” Arthur said mildly, “and it’s my chosen occupation, just like reviewing restaurants is your chosen occupation.”

It wasn’t exactly an old argument, but more like an annoyance Arthur tried to ignore. Francis had no interest in his bookstore, and he had no real interest in the kind of restaurants Francis traveled to in order to critique. But even if he had no interest in it, Arthur was happy to acknowledge that what Francis did required skill, knowledge and experience; he never got the feeling that Francis thought he did anything more than ring up sales in his bookstore. It rankled, but it wasn’t worth arguing about.

“*Oui, mon cher*,” Francis said, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. “I meant nothing by that. Shall we go?”

Barely an hour into the evening at the pub, Alfred gazed across the table at Francis and wondered what in the hell Arthur saw in him. He was definitely a good looking man, almost pretty in his features, and wore well-cut, expensive clothes. But, *Christ*, he was snotty and annoying and a bit of an ass, just like Gilbert had warned. And now, right in front of everyone he was openly flirting with Matthew. He was well into Matthew's personal space, and while his cousin was doing his best to edge away, he could practically see the steam coming out of Gilbert's ears. As for Arthur...he didn't want to look at him for his reaction, but he couldn't help himself. Arthur was holding himself very still and carefully not looking at the scene, but his lips were pressed together and his fingers were clenched around his glass. Kiku hadn't said much once Francis had arrived, but Alfred knew he saw what was going on and was embarrassed. For himself, he'd like nothing more than to invite Francis outside and kick his ass.

Suddenly Gilbert slammed his empty glass down on the table, making Matthew and Kiku jump. "Looks like it's our turn to buy," he said loudly. "Francis, why don't you give me a hand at the bar?"

Francis looked annoyed, but there wasn't much he could do without being openly rude, so he only smiled and stood, following Gilbert to the bar.

When he was gone, Arthur let out a sigh. "Matthew, I'm sorry," he said quietly. "He doesn't really mean anything by it. It's just the way he is."

Matthew, who had relaxed once Francis was gone, assured him quickly, "No, it's fine, Arthur. Don't worry about it."

Alfred wanted to tell him that it *wasn't* fine if it made him uncomfortable and upset Arthur, but he clamped his mouth shut and said nothing. He didn't want to upset Arthur further. Besides, from where he was sitting he could see something neither Matthew nor Arthur could see, and he didn't think Francis would be doing any more flirting that night.

Francis and Gilbert were standing at the bar, for all appearances just waiting for their drinks and having a chummy conversation. Except Alfred could see where Gilbert's hand was and Francis was very carefully not moving, his face strained while Gilbert spoke earnestly to him. Finally, Francis gave a brief, terse nod, and Gilbert removed his hand, retrieved the drinks on the bar, and came back to the table, looking immensely pleased with himself. Francis followed more slowly and spent the rest of the evening in sullen silence. Alfred approved.

Alfred quickly locked up his studio, ran outside and hopped on his bike. He was running late, but remembering Arthur's parting words at the pub last night – "*Don't break your neck getting there, Alfred. I'll have plenty of help.*" – he was careful not to speed unnecessarily.

Today was the biggest day of the year at Arthur's bookstore, his annual open house and clearance sale for his less expensive books. Arthur had a loyal following, and apparently there was always a constant flow of traffic through the store during this event. In the past Arthur had always handled it by himself with occasional help from Gilbert, because Francis had apparently never been available to lend a hand, but this year he was going to have Kiku,

Matthew, Gilbert *and* Alfred (after he finished up with his Sunday appointments that he hadn't been able to re-schedule). Francis, as usual, would be absent doing whatever it was Francis did. Well, after the way he behaved last night, Alfred was sure no one would miss him.

The store was certainly hopping when Alfred got there and chained his bike outside. Through the window he could see a crowd of people milling about, many with books in their arms, and he saw Arthur talking with an older, well-dressed couple. He nearly ran into Gil, who was coming out, fishing his car keys from his pockets and looking like he was in a hurry. "Whoa!"

Gil looked up, startled, then jiggled his car keys. "Need more food. It's been a mad house in there today."

"Awesome."

Alfred went to pass him, but Gilbert caught him by the arm, hesitating when Alfred gave him a questioning look. "In case it escaped your attention last night, Francis is a dick." Then he loped off toward his car, leaving Alfred to stare after him.

"Yeah, got that," he muttered, and pushed open the door to the shop. Kiku was manning the cash register up front, and Matthew was updating the inventory as books left the shop, leaving Arthur free to mingle with his customers, answer questions and make a list of books people were searching for, promising to put out feelers of his own, and examining books people brought in for restoration. Matt and Kiku were both busy, so he gave them a wave, then worked his way through the store to where Arthur was just finishing up with the older couple. He waited until they moved on, then stepped up to Arthur with a big smile...which froze on his face.

Arthur straightened his shoulders and smiled back, but it was a little strained. "I hope you didn't break any speed laws to get here, Alfred."

"No, I was very law-abiding," Alfred said with determined cheerfulness, keeping his eyes away from Arthur's neck with an effort. But Gil's words from outside came back to him – *Francis is a dick* – and now he understood.

Arthur pulled at the collar of his shirt, and Alfred bet he had been doing that all day. But although his shirt was buttoned up completely and his tie was tied as tight as it could get, Arthur would have had to wrap a scarf around his neck up to his chin in order to hide the love bites that blossomed there for all to see. Okay, Alfred had given his share of love bites to partners, and had them given to him, but always, always, both he and his partner had been careful to keep them in an area where they would be hidden by clothes. And certainly, on the eve of the biggest professional day of Arthur's year, there was no excuse for Francis to have marked his partner – supposedly the person he loved and wanted to support – in this manner. But he couldn't very well say, *Your boyfriend's a douche*, no matter how much he wanted to. So instead he said, "Has it been like this all day?"

Arthur gave him a look of pure gratitude, then nodded his head. "I've never had an open house like this before. It's incredible. I think I've sold more today than I have all month."

“That’s awesome,” Alfred said, and he meant it. He held out his hands and rubbed them together. “So, I’m here to help. What do you want me to do?”

“Okay, Al, what’s this all about?”

“What? I can’t invite my favorite cousin and his boyfriend over for an evening of video games and scary movies without having an ulterior motive?” Alfred asked, with his most innocent expression in place.

Matthew crossed his arms over his chest and gave him a level look. “You *can*, but if that were the case, we’d be playing video games already. So, what’s up?”

Matthew and Gilbert were sitting on his sofa, watching him curiously, while Alfred walked back and forth, trying to work out how he wanted to say this, then abruptly, he shoved aside the boxes of computer games on his coffee table to make room, and he sat down, facing them. “Okay, it’s about Arthur.”

Gilbert’s eyes narrowed. “Is he okay?”

“Is there a reason he wouldn’t be okay?” Alfred asked cautiously.

“Don’t fuck with me when it comes to Arthur, boy,” Gilbert snapped.

Alfred sat back, holding his hands up. “Hey, I’m not fucking with anyone.”

Matthew laid a hand on Gilbert’s arm, and some of the tension drained from his body. “Fuck,” he growled, sinking back into the sofa. “I hate that French bastard. This is about those hickies, isn’t it? What a total *dick*.”

Alfred took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. “Francis is a *creep*. I got that much within five minutes of meeting him, and I can’t for the life of me figure what Arthur sees in him. But he wouldn’t, you know, actually hurt Arthur, would he?”

Gilbert gave him a level look. “If I thought he had, I’d rip the bastard’s balls off,” he growled. He gave a disgusted snort. “Not that Arthur couldn’t rip his balls off himself if he wanted to. He just wouldn’t.”

“Well why the hell not?”

Instead of answering, Gilbert looked at Matthew. “Al’s his friend too, Gilbert, and he cares about Arthur,” Matthew said quietly. “Maybe you should tell him.”

Gilbert seemed to think about that, then sighed and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Matthew and Alfred both waved the offer off, so he lit one for himself and took a long drag before speaking. “Arthur Kirkland 101,” he said wryly. He pointed the cigarette at Alfred. “I know you’ve got a big, fat crush on him, but so help me, if you do anything to hurt him, I’ll rip *your* balls off, got it?”

“If I ever hurt him, I’ll stand there and let you,” Alfred said quietly.

Gilbert studied him for a moment, then shook his head. “Christ, you’ve got it bad, don’t you?”

Alfred felt his face flush, and the open sympathy on his cousin’s face didn’t help, but he said, “I know he doesn’t want to be anything more, so I just want to be a good friend, okay?”

“Fair enough. I’ll hold you do it.” Gilbert took another drag on his cigarette and exhaled a stream of smoke. “When I met Arthur, he was a right little punk. He was small for his age, but he didn’t back down from any fight, and there were plenty of fights to be had in our neighborhood. He was tough as old boots and he could stand up to just about anyone. If he’d kept on the way he was going, he probably would have ended up in prison, or dead. But he got in one fight too many. The kid he was fighting tripped over something when he hit him, and he knocked himself out on the sidewalk. Had to get an ambulance to take him to the hospital. Turned out he was okay, but that scared the hell out of Arthur, and he never got into another fight. In fact, he got his ass kicked a few times because he wouldn’t lift a finger. You never saw a kid turn around so fast. He was always too smart for his own good, but now he actually did his homework and took the tests and showed up at school every day. He turned into the type of kid any parent would be proud of.” Finished with his cigarette, it stabbed it out viciously on the coaster Alfred handed him. “That is, if his parents had actually given a damn about him. And, no, I’m not telling you that story,” he growled. “All you need to know is that he had a rotten home life and he spent as much time as he could over at my place. We weren’t exactly the picture of a perfect family, but we did care about him, and he knew he’d always have a place to sleep and food to eat with us.” He smiled suddenly. “My little brother still sends him birthday cards and Christmas presents.”

Alfred felt a lump form in his throat and he swallowed hard. He’d had such a normal, loving upbringing from parents who supported and encouraged him, and he’d never had to worry about having a place to sleep or where his next meal was coming from. It was hard to think of the man he knew having that kind of life.

Gilbert seemed to know what he was thinking. “Hard to believe, isn’t it? Well, trust me, he worked his ass off to be what he is today. He graduated school early, got scholarships, went to uni, worked every job he could squeeze in to make it all happen.” He shook his head. “He couldn’t believe his luck when someone like Francis Bonnefoy showed an interest in him.”

“And that’s it, isn’t it?” Alfred asked dully. “He doesn’t think he’s good enough, doesn’t think he deserves someone like Bonnefoy.”

“You said it, not me.”

Matthew, who had been silent through all this, finally spoke up. “That’s fucked up,” he declared with a frown.

“Sure is, babe,” Gilbert agree, sliding an arm around him, “but he’d spent most of his life being rejected by people who should’ve loved him. He didn’t really stand a chance when that French bastard showed up and gave him a perfect smile.”

Matthew looked like he was still considering all this, and said quietly, “Francis knows this, doesn’t he?”

“Francis isn’t stupid,” Gilbert answered, just as quietly. “He knows.”

Alfred stood up and walked over to the window, staring out into the night lights. “But Arthur loves him.”

“Fell head over heels,” Gilbert confirmed. But then he said thoughtfully, “But as to whether he’s happy or not, I’m not sure even Arthur knows that.”

Alfred turned away from the window. “Do you think Francis cheats on him?” he asked abruptly.

Gilbert shrugged. “I’ve got no proof. But he spends a lot of time traveling, and I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him. And, I’d very much like to throw him.” He took out another cigarette, but turned it around in his hand instead of lighting it. “Look,” he said slowly, “I know you care about Arthur, and I know you’ve got it bad for him, but just be careful around Francis, okay? He can be kind of possessive.”

Alfred smiled sharply, picturing himself punching Francis in his smug, smirking face. “Yeah? Well, he’s welcome to take it up with me.”

It was Matthew who told him seriously, “Al, he wouldn’t take it up with *you*.”

Mouth tight, Alfred strode across the room and leaned down, right in Gilbert’s face while he poked him in the chest with a hard finger. “Did I not ask you if you thought he would hurt Arthur?”

Ignoring the finger poking his chest, Gilbert looked up at him, his expression grim. “There are a lot of ways of hurting someone without laying a hand on them. You think Francis can’t make him miserable in a hundred different ways if he wants to?”

Alfred flashed back to the sight of love bites too obvious to be hidden by a shirt collar and the embarrassed way Arthur kept trying to hide them. He dropped back onto the coffee table with a groan. Dropping his head into his hands, he mumbled, “Please tell me I’m not making it worse.”

“Nah.” Gilbert gave his foot a not-so-gentle kick. “You aren’t *that* obvious. That French bastard can’t see further than his own reflection in a mirror; just watch yourself when you’re around him.”

Alfred sighed. “Well, Francis doesn’t seem to be around a whole lot, so maybe it won’t be a problem.”

“The problem with Francis is that the bastard turns up when you least expect him.” He gave Alfred a look that was only half-jesting. “So just try not to look like a teenage girl in love when you’re around Arthur, all right?”

Arthur carefully studied each photograph spread out on his desk, taking his time and absorbing the details. He was aware of Alfred shifting impatiently – or nervously – off to the side, but he refused to hurry. Finally he sat back in his chair and looked up. Alfred was watching him with a touch of anxiety in his eyes, and Arthur gave his head a little shake. “Alfred, these are bloody brilliant.”

Alfred’s face lit up and a wide smile split his face and he pulled over a chair and dropped down opposite Arthur. “You really think so?”

It never failed to surprise Arthur that a man who was so confident in his abilities in the studio could sometimes be so insecure when it came to the work he felt so passionate about. “Alfred, surely you know how good these are?” he asked gently. “You’ve captured some truly remarkably raw moments here. They’re really quite amazing.”

“Yeah, I thought I got what I was going for, but I wanted you to look at them. I mean, you’ve got a really good eye, and you’re, like, completely honest when I show you crap.”

It’s true. Arthur had told him quite honestly when he thought Alfred’s photos were a bit too pretentious or ‘fluff’ as he called them, but he knew how important honest critique was when someone was trying to hone their craft. “Yes, I have always been honest with you, and I’m being honest now. These definitely need to go in the book.”

‘The book’ was Alfred’s dream, and Arthur had also taken up the cause. After spending so much time with Alfred, and after borrowing back the book he had sold Alfred the day they met, Arthur thought he understood Alfred’s passion now and what he wanted his book to be. After spending his spare time traveling around London looking for those moments of ‘real life’ Alfred was searching for, he would bring the results in to Arthur and they would discuss their merits and whether they were good enough to be considered for ‘the book.’

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too,” Alfred nodded, but he looked relieved.

Arthur pulled two photos to the front and asked, “Where did you take these?” He looked up sharply. “You promised me no more alleys.”

The younger man squirmed in his seat. “Yeah, well, you see that photo there with the flower and the old bicycle? I was taking that picture, and I saw this little side street –“

“Alley,” Arthur said flatly.

“—and it looked promising, and it was totally worth it because I got those other shots,” Alfred finished triumphantly.

Arthur rubbed his forehead. Sometimes dealing with Alfred was like dealing with a toddler who had no concept of danger. “Alfred, I do wish you wouldn’t go off like that alone. I know this isn’t New York City, but it’s still bloody dangerous in the places you’re going.”

“Yeah, but I’m only taking pictures,” he shrugged.

“And if you happen to unwittingly take a picture of a drug dealer doing business? Do you think he’s just going to let you walk away with your camera and that film?”

“Okay, point taken. I’ve always been real careful, but there’s a lot of other places I want to go, so I’ll lay off the alleys for now.” He stood up suddenly and looked around the shop, as if suddenly captured by an idea. Arthur had learned that Alfred’s thought processes could take him all over the place, seemingly at the speed of light, so this wasn’t anything unusual. He simply waited until Alfred was ready to share whatever was on his mind. After a few moments of consideration, Alfred turned to Arthur. “Kiku wanted me to take some shots of the shop for the web page.” Arthur nodded; Kiku had also mentioned this to him. After much discussion and persuasion, Arthur had agreed to allow Kiku to set up a web page for the shop. Kiku refused to accept any payment for the design; instead he only asked that he could use the Kirkland webpage as an example of his work when soliciting other clients. “But, I’ve been thinking,” Alfred continued slowly, “I’ve noticed how this place goes all sepia-toned when the sun hits it just right some afternoons, with all the wood and all, and I’ve got an idea for a different kind of picture.”

Arthur’s eyebrows lifted. “What kind of picture?”

“Well,” Alfred said, drawing out the word obnoxiously, “a picture with you in it.” When Arthur opened his mouth to object, he hurried on, “Hey, what’s a bookshop without someone reading a book? And this place would make a great setting.” He pulled out the little digital camera that Arthur had learned he was never without.

Arthur kept a wary eye on him as he began aiming the camera around. “I thought you didn’t do these types of staged shots outside the studio?”

“I don’t. Or, I haven’t since college. But I really like the idea.” He lowered the camera suddenly and gazed at Arthur.

“What?”

Alfred seemed strangely reluctant to say anything, but then offered an embarrassed little smile. “I had this other idea too. About you. I mean – a portrait of you,” he corrected hastily. When Arthur felt his eyes widen, Alfred hurried on apologetically, “Look, it’s the curse of a portrait photographer. We can’t help ourselves. We keep putting people we know into different settings and imagining how we’d shoot them in the studio.” He laughed, running a hand through his hair. “I have to tell you, if I were shooting Gilbert, it would be all punk rock and chains and leather.”

Arthur laughed too. “You wouldn’t be wrong. He’s actually quite respectable these days, but the punk rocker isn’t that far under the surface.”

“He can be as punk as he likes as long as he’s good to my cousin.” Alfred said it lightly, but Arthur heard the unspoken question underneath.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that, Alfred,” Arthur quickly reassured him. “Gil seems quite taken with Matthew.” He leaned forward a little. “I know Gilbert can come

across as a bit over-the-top at times, but he doesn't have a unkind bone in his body, and he's very loyal to his friends. I can certainly attest to that. And he really is quite fond of Matthew."

Alfred looked relieved. "That's good to know." Then he flashed an impish grin. "So, are you ready to hear what I have in mind for you?"

Arthur grimaced, but he knew there wasn't any way out of this. "Go on then," he sighed. "Let's hear the worst."

Alfred dropped back into the chair opposite Arthur, once again the photographer. "It's kind of strange," he said slowly, "it just popped into my head, and now I can't get rid of it. I'd put you in a clearing in a forest. The sun would be coming through the leaves overhead, and there would be this awesome contrast between light and dark. And you'd be sitting against a tree with a book on your lap, reading, absolutely lost to the world."

Arthur caught his breath, and Alfred stopped abruptly. "What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing, it's just..." Arthur ran a hand through his hair, realizing too late that it was probably a right mess by now, and gave a little laugh. "How odd," he murmured.

"Arthur?"

Arthur looked up and met Alfred's confused gaze. He had such blue eyes, yet a different blue from Francis' eyes. These were the blue of a summer sky, all light and humor and absolutely guileless. There was nothing guileless about Francis; he could be guarded and calculating when he chose to be, and Arthur didn't like looking into his eyes when he was. But a person could get lost looking into Alfred's eyes, if they allowed themselves.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"No, no, of course you didn't." Arthur gave his head a little shake as memories flittered back, things he hadn't thought of in years. "I've never told anyone about this, not even Gil." Alfred was looking more worried by the moment, so he hurried on. "I was always quite the reader, but I was the only one in my family who cared about books. I had three older brothers who went out of their way to torment me, and hiding my library books was one of their favorite tricks...or burning them if they could get away with it. Anyhow, if I wanted to read in peace I had to hide somewhere, and I found this place about a mile from where we lived. It was in a woods and there was this little clearing, exactly as you described it." He smiled to himself. "To a child it looked positively magical, like the type of place fairies would play." He felt himself blush and rubbed his nose. "You can see why I never told Gil."

"That's awesome! We so need to go there! And I know just the book you need to be reading." When Arthur looked at him inquiringly, he declared, "Peter Pan!"

That had actually been one of his favorite books as a child, but he asked skeptically, "Peter Pan?" No point in giving away *all* his secrets.

"It's perfect. Who doesn't want to be the boy who never grows up and gets to fight pirates and be all heroic?" Alfred slapped his hand on the desk as if everything was arranged. "That's

settled then. We'll go there and I can take your portrait just the way I – ha – pictured it.”

“Now see here, I can't just –“

“But right now, I can get some shots to give me an idea how I want to stage the shop.” And he fit action to words by aiming his little digital camera and quickly getting several shots from different angles. Then he stopped and studied him until Arthur started to squirm. “I was going to ask if you had a three piece suit, but I think what you usually wear is even better. Casual, but buttoned up. Brown pants and brown jacket to blend in with the tone. Then, I know you've got a green sweater vest, so you should wear that. It really brings out the green in your eyes and the color would just pop when everything else around is neutral.” Arthur felt himself flush, yet again, but Alfred seemed blissfully unaware. “I'd sit you here with a book in your hands, and, your face should be tilted so...” He reached out and gently touched the side of Arthur's face. It should have been the impersonal touch of a photographer, it *was* the impersonal touch of a photographer, but the warmth of Alfred's fingers seemed to burn his skin, and when he met Alfred's gaze, which was very, very close, he heard Alfred's breath catch.

Arthur didn't know how long they stayed in that frozen tableau when movement through the window caught his attention. His eyes flicked over Alfred's shoulder and he saw Francis standing outside looking in. He jerked his head back reflexively and Alfred seemed to come to himself and he dropped his hand to the desk as the bell over the door sounded.

“Well, this is very cozy.”

Arthur saw Alfred squeeze his eyes shut and heard the heartfelt muttered, “Fuck!” before Alfred turned around, all bright smiles. “Hello, Francis.” He held up his camera. “Just getting some establishing shots. Arthur's going to let me take some photos of the shop.”

“And you want Arthur in your photos?” Francis sounded insultingly dubious.

“He's perfect for the atmosphere,” Alfred said casually, “don't you think?”

Francis ignored him and said, “I'm going home, Arthur. I assume I'll see you there tonight?”

Arthur suppressed his sigh. “Of course you will. I'll be closing at my usual time.”

“I'll see you there then.” Then he leaned over and nuzzled the side of Arthur's neck before slipping a hand around the back of his neck and pulling him firmly in for a lingering kiss on the lips. “Don't be late,” he murmured, then turned and swept from the shop.

Arthur had to force himself to uncurl the fist in his lap. Francis knew he didn't like public displays of affection, and the only reason he did it this time was because he had an audience, and that audience was Alfred. Oh, it was going to be a pleasant evening at home.

Alfred was gripping his hair with one hand. “I'm sorry, so, so sorry.”

“Oh, don't be ridiculous, Alfred. We weren't doing anything. Francis was just being a prat.”

“Yeah, but, I know how it *looked*.”

“Alfred, please don’t upset yourself. It’s fine.” He stood. “But I do have some stock to unpack before I can close up for the night, so perhaps...”

“Oh, sure, sure.” Alfred hurriedly removed the photos from the desk and slipped them back into his portfolio. He still looked terribly guilty and something else that Arthur couldn’t quite place. He turned to leave, then abruptly stopped at the door and turned back. “You know, you can call me. I mean, if you want to talk, or whatever.”

Arthur wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that, so he nodded. “Thank you.”

Alfred nodded sharply, then left.

Arthur sat back down in his chair and tried to puzzle out exactly what had happened here tonight.

Alfred carefully balanced the cup of tea, cup of coffee and box of pastries as he pushed open the door to Kirkland’s. He’d stopped at that little bakery Arthur liked so much and gotten him a cup of Earl Grey and some very English-looking pastries. He was just going to pop in to make sure everything was okay after what happened yesterday, he told himself. Nothing more. He just needed to reassure himself that he didn’t screw anything up for Arthur.

The desk was empty when he stepped inside and he called out his usual, “Yo, Artie!”

After a moment, Arthur called from the back, sounding a little stressed. “I’m stocking shelves, Alfred. I - I don’t have time this morning for a chat. Very busy.”

“That’s okay. I’m just dropping off some tea and stuff for you. I’ll bring it back to you.”

“No, no, that’s okay. Just leave it on the desk. And, thank you,” he added somewhat belatedly.

Alfred dropped the box on the desk, but continued holding the drinks. Something about Arthur’s tone sounded very off to him. “Is everything okay?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Frowning, Alfred set the drinks on the desk and walked toward Arthur’s voice. “You’re not mad at me, are you?” he asked, a little hesitantly.

“No, I’m not angry with you, Alfred. I’m just very busy today.”

“Yeah, but you’re never too busy for Mr. Earl Grey.” Alfred continued, a little more cheerfully. He found Arthur at the back shelves, putting some books into the mystery section. “Hey, a tea break won’t hurt, right?”

Arthur stiffened as he must have realized Alfred was right behind him now, but didn’t turn around. “I told you, I don’t have time right now, Alfred,” he said again, a little sharply. “In fact, the next few days are going to be very busy. Perhaps next week?”

Alfred's shoulders slumped as he heard the dismissal in the other man's voice. "You are mad at me, aren't you?"

"I've already told you, I'm not. Now would you please –"

"Then why won't you even *look* at me?" Alfred demanded, his voice raising in pitch.

Arthur seemed to flinch at the tone, but then his body sagged in something like defeat and he slowly turned, not meeting Alfred's eyes.

Alfred stared at him, feeling like he'd been punched in the gut. He couldn't take his eyes from the bluish-black bruise that extended from Arthur's cheek up to his eye. "I'm going to fucking *kill* him," he snarled.

"No, you most certainly will not." Arthur's voice was tight. "It was an accident."

"His fist *accidentally* hit your face?"

"We had an argument; it got a little out of hand, that's all."

"That's all? Christ, Arthur, he fucking *punched* you." Without thinking, he reached out, needing to touch that hurt, needing to somehow take the pain away, but froze when Arthur flinched away.

"Sorry," Arthur muttered, waving a hand and looking embarrassed.

Alfred swallowed, then said, as calmly as he could. "I've brought you some tea. Will you just come out and sit down with me for a while?"

Arthur nodded and led the way out front. Once they were settled in their usual places, Alfred took some time to study the other man in the light by the window. The bruise was even uglier in the daylight, and Arthur looked like he hadn't slept, which was no surprise, and he drank carefully, as if trying to avoid using any muscles on the bruised side of his face.

"Did you put ice on that?" Alfred asked abruptly.

"No, but I will tonight." When Alfred continued to glare, he huffed, "I've had worse falling off my bike as a lad. It's fine."

"You can keep saying it's fine until the cows come home, Arthur, but it's *not fine*."

Arthur sighed and set his cup down. "Francis and I are...going through a rough patch right now. It was my fault as much as it was his."

"Yeah, well, if I see Francis walking around with a black eye, then I'll believe that," Alfred said flatly.

"Can we...just not talk about this?" Arthur asked, and he sounded so utterly weary that Alfred immediately felt guilty, but he had to know.

“Can I just ask one question?”

Arthur looked at him then, and the kindness in his eyes made the back of Alfred’s throat burn. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” Alfred muttered.

“What happened here yesterday may have been the catalyst,” Arthur explained carefully, “but there was so much more. So much that had been festering for so long.” He shrugged helplessly. “It just all came to a head, I suppose.”

Alfred leaned across the desk. “Arthur, you can come stay with me,” he said intently. “I’ll sleep on the couch and you can have the bed. Just until you’re sure...”

Arthur’s face softened even as he shook his head. “I’m not a battered spouse, Alfred,” he explained gently. “This –“ he indicated his face – “hasn’t happened before and it won’t happen again. Francis has apologized.”

Alfred snorted.

“And we’ve agreed to work through this.” He produced a strained smile. “But I won’t be coming to the pub until this fades. I’m afraid Gil actually *would* kill him.”

With Francis away on another business trip, Arthur had no reason to hurry home after he closed the shop, so he put up the Closed sign, locked the door and decided to get some work done. Things with Francis had been...tense, with Francis alternating between being sweetly attentive and coolly aloof, leaving Arthur alternatively hopeful and hurt, and overall confused. But they had agree to try to work through their difficulties, so Arthur tried to be understanding regarding Francis’ mood swings; after all, he knew he wasn’t the easiest person to live with either.

These thoughts were occupying his mind perhaps more than they should when he climbed the ladder with a heavy box of old tax papers balanced on one shoulder. His plan was to stash it in the highest, furthest shelf he could reach of the bookshelf in the back of the shop. In one terrible instant he realized he had over-reached, then over-balanced, and then he didn’t have time to think about anything else because he was falling along with the ladder, and he hit the floor so hard he actually heard the crack of the bone snapping in his arm.

His vision went white, then black, then fuzzy, and then the pain hit. “Jesus *Christ*,” he hissed. He didn’t know how long he laid there, pinned under the heavy wooden ladder until he tried to move. He bit back his scream and stopped immediately, panting. When he couldn’t even think of what to do next he wondered how hard he’d hit his head and couldn’t even remember if he’d been knocked out; then he wondered hazily if he’d lay here for days before anyone stopped by to find him... “Get a grip on yourself,” he grumbled, irritated, “and stop being so bloody stupid.” He had a cell phone in his pocket, and one working arm, all he had to do was call someone.

That, of course, was easier said than done, because every movement sent shards of fresh pain through his broken arm, and his head was aching in time with his heartbeat. But he gritted his teeth, and managed to work his right hand into his pants pocket and pull out his cell phone. Praying it wasn't broken in the fall, he held it up in front of his face and blinked at it, the screen too blurry for him to read. By touch, he moved his thumb to one of the speed dial buttons, and he pushed.

He must have drifted off, because the next thing he knew he could hear a key in the lock and the sound of the door crashing open. "Arthur! Arthur, where are you?"

Arthur winced a little at the way Alfred's frantic voice seemed to boom through the shop. He tried to call out, "Back here," but it came out as a croak.

But it didn't matter because by then Alfred had dropped down by his side and was gently cradling his head in his hands, his face scared. "Arthur? Can you hear me?"

"Oh, Christ, Artie, what did I tell you about this fuckin' ladder?" Gilbert. He sounded upset. Oh, right, he had a key to the shop. Alfred couldn't have gotten in without a key. Although, knowing Alfred, that wouldn't have stopped him.

"Alfred, stay with Arthur. Gil, we need to get this ladder off him, but we have to be careful. Try not to jostle him." And Matthew, being calm and practical for all of them, bless him. Practical Matt. Practical cats. The naming of cats is a difficult matter...

"Arthur!" Alfred's piercing - frightened? - voice brought him back from his drifting thoughts and he blinked, trying to bring him into focus. "Don't pass out on me. Stay with me."

Dear, sweet Alfred. The boy with the kind blue eyes. "I'll stay with you," he murmured, smiling sweetly.

Alfred's eyes widened, then squeezed shut for a moment before he smiled shakily in return. "Stay awake, Arthur," he said hoarsely. "Don't go to sleep."

Within moments, the terrible weight of the heavy old ladder was off him and he was able to breathe a little easier.

Arthur blinked up into Alfred's worried eyes. "Broke m'arm," he said drowsily. "Snap!"

Alfred stared at him for a moment, then looked over his shoulder and said something to the other two, sounding tense. He quickly stripped off his bomber jacket and draped it over Arthur's chest, then looked down at him, trying to smile reassuringly. "Arthur," he said carefully, "did you hit your head when you fell?" Arthur felt his fingers moving over the back of his skull and gasped when they hit a tender spot. "Sorry, sorry," Alfred murmured. "You've got a lump there."

He could hear Matthew talking in the background, but he didn't seem to be talking to Gilbert. Odd.

“Just try to rest, Arthur,” Alfred said gently. “But don’t go to sleep. An ambulance is on the way.”

He frowned. “Don’t want an ambulance.” That’s what he meant to say anyhow. It seemed to come out as ‘don wanna ‘blance’.

Gilbert’s face came into view above him, looking down with a scowl. “Too fuckin’ bad, chum. You’ll go in an ambulance and like it.” Alfred turned to him and said something under his breath, but sharp, and Gilbert’s face disappeared. Then suddenly he was kneeling down beside him and he didn’t look angry any longer; his features seemed to melt together somehow, but Arthur thought that might have been his vision playing tricks on him. “Oh, *mein alter freund*, always causing trouble, aren’t you?” But his voice was soft and Arthur felt fingers gently touch the top of his head. “You just keep talking to us, and the ambulance will be here before you know it, yeah? Then we’ll get you all fixed up. You’re gonna be fine.”

That was all Arthur remembered until he woke up in the hospital later. After that it was all a blur of X-rays and blood pressure cuffs and needles and questions, questions, questions. It was near midnight when he was finally released with a cast on his arm, his arm in a sling, and a sheaf of papers in his fist containing instructions of what he was supposed to do and not to do.

His trio of friends were waiting for him and Alfred immediately moved to his side, relieved him of the papers, and put an arm around his waist to steady him. Apparently he’d given himself a mild concussion, and he had to admit, he was grateful for the support because he still felt a little spaced out. He was also shamefaced with embarrassment at causing such a fuss. But Gilbert, who was the only one likely to give him any grief over it, announced cheerfully, “We’re all having a sleepover at your place, Artie.”

When Arthur simply stared at him blankly, Matthew explained, “You have a concussion and you shouldn’t be alone tonight. Someone needs to wake you up and ask you some questions every couple of hours. It’s just a precaution,” he added quickly, “but better safe than sorry.”

Gilbert jerked his head toward Alfred. “Hero here wanted to do it, but we decided it would be better if we all stayed.”

Arthur sighed. Yes, if Francis should find out he and Alfred had spent the night alone together... “Sorry to be such a bother.”

“Hey, you’re not a bother.” Alfred spoke for the first time and began moving him carefully toward the door. “It’s what friends do, right? Besides, it’ll be fun! Tomorrow we can eat lots of junk food and watch scary movies.” Arthur couldn’t stop himself from leaning a little into Alfred and he couldn’t help appreciating the way Alfred’s arm immediately tightened around him. He was content to let Alfred lead him to the car and listened to his chatter without really hearing what he was saying, just taking comfort in his touch and his closeness.

It was a long night at his apartment. Gilbert was the one who helped him get into his pajamas, but it was Alfred who gently, but insistently woke him up to ask him questions. At first the

questions were serious and practical – *What's your name? What's your birth date? What's your address?* – but as they passed down the questions became a little silly as it was obvious by now that Arthur hadn't suffered any ill effects from the concussion – *Would you rather have a hamburger or a cup of tea? Manchester United or Arsenal? Scones or Twinkies?*

Arthur could see the sun shining around the edges of the curtains when he blinked his eyes open and laid still for a few moments, taking stock of how he felt. His head felt okay, which was a relief, but his left arm was throbbing a bit. He vaguely remembered Alfred telling him he could have some pain pills in the morning if he needed them, and that sounded like an excellent idea. It wasn't until he tried to get up that he realized just how *bruised* his body must be. "Holy, fucking..." He sat on the edge of the bed, catching his breath. Everything hurt. Every muscle, every joint, every bone in his body. The crash to the floor had been bad enough, but having that heavy ladder fall on top of him must have put the icing on the cake. He managed to get to his feet, shrug into his robe, and then shuffled out to the living room like an old man, whimpering a bit as he went.

In the living room, Alfred was stretched out on the sofa, a blanket over him, but he was awake, listening to his iPod. When he saw Arthur, he pulled out his earbuds and sat up. "Hey," he greeted. "How're you feeling?" He quickly got off the sofa and pulled the blanket aside, making room for Arthur, who walked slowly over, then looked down at the cushions in resignation. Getting down there was going to hurt like hell. But then a strong arm was around his back and a steadying hand on his good arm. "Just take it slow. Gilbert said you looked like a walking bruise last night."

"I feel like a walking bruise," he groaned, allowing Alfred to ease him down. "Bloody hell, who thought a little fall off a ladder --?"

"Little fall?" Alfred put his hands on his hips and gave him what could only be termed a glare. "That was a helluva fall, Arthur. You're lucky you only ended up with a broken arm and a mild concussion. In fact, you're lucky you woke up and were able to call me. In *fact*, you're lucky—"

"All right, all right." Arthur really didn't want a lecture, so he gave in to his baser impulses and put a hand to his head, striving for pitiful. "I know. But can we save the lecture for later? I've got a bit of a headache."

"Oh, hell, I'm sorry." Alfred looked so apologetic that Arthur immediately felt guilty. "How about I make you some tea and toast? Once you get something in your stomach you can have a pain pill."

"You don't have to —"

"Already on it," the other man said cheerfully and headed for the kitchen.

"Where are Gil and Matthew?"

"Don't worry, they're here. They took the guest room."

"I wasn't worried," Arthur said, frowning a little.

“Yeah, I know, but...” Alfred didn’t finish the sentence as he clattered about in the kitchen. Arthur heard water splashing into the kettle and cupboards opening. “When is Francis coming back?”

That was a good question. Arthur tried to remember what Francis had told him about his assignment. “Two more days, I think. He’s in Cornwall.”

“You going to call him and tell him what happened?”

Arthur wrinkled his nose and thought about it, then shook his head. “No, there’s no point really. I’m fine, and he’s got a job to do. It’s not like he can just cut his assignment short and come back to look after me.”

There was a sharp sound from the kitchen as if Alfred had set down a cup particularly hard. Arthur was going to ask if everything was all right, but decided it might be better to end this particular discussion. He dropped his head onto the sofa back and closed his eyes, listening to the domestic sounds coming from the kitchen. Sometime later he felt the sofa dip and heard the sound of a tray being placed on the coffee table. He blinked his eyes open, realizing he’d nearly dozed off again, and sat up.

“Breakfast is served, m’lud.”

“Your accent is atrocious.”

Alfred grinned brightly. “Yeah, I know.” He handed Arthur a cup of tea and settled back with his own mug of coffee.

“You must be exhausted after getting up last night to ask me all the those questions.”

The American shrugged. “I’m okay right now, but I’ll probably crash later.”

Arthur sipped at his tea, sighing at the taste, the heat and the sheer comfort of it. They were silent while he finished his tea, ate his toast, and then took the pill Alfred shook out of the bottle for him. As he watched Alfred’s large, capable hands open the pill container he realized with a pang of frustration that he probably wouldn’t be able to open it one-handed.

Alfred looked at the container thoughtfully. “I’d better put these in something else for you. They obviously weren’t thinking of how someone with one arm in a sling was going to get it open.” Before Arthur could say anything, Alfred was off the sofa and back in the kitchen, rummaging through the cupboards. A cry of “Aha!” brought Alfred back into the living room. He’d found a little cut glass candy dish that Francis occasionally used for chocolates, and placed it on the coffee table. “I’ll just dump these in here, as long as you remember they’re not candy.”

“I don’t think there’s any danger of that,” he said dryly.

As Alfred busied himself pouring out the pills, Arthur said hesitantly, “You don’t have to stay, you know. You must be exhausted. Perhaps you should go home and get some rest.”

Alfred looked at him, eyebrows raised, “You throwing me out?”

“What? No! Of course not.” Arthur found himself hastening to reassure him before he saw Alfred hiding his grin. “Git,” he grumbled. “But you’ve already done so much. I don’t want to put you out.”

“You’re not putting me out. I *like* spending time with you. And I meant what I said about the four of us hanging out and watching scary movies and stuff today. Besides, you shouldn’t be left alone. Seriously, dude, I’ve had a broken arm, and you just don’t realize at first how inconvenient it can be. You need a couple of days to get back on your feet.”

Inwardly he admitted he was happy to have the company; and it would be kind of nice to have someone look after him, even for a day, when he was feeling so rotten. But he let out a heavy sigh as if he were making a huge concession. “Well then, I suppose I’ll just have to put up with you waiting on me hand and foot, won’t it?”

A broad grin split Alfred’s face. “Yep, I guess you will.”

Arthur gazed out the shop window at the pouring rain, and sighed. It had been a slow day at the shop, a cold, rainy Thursday, and not a lot of people had ventured out to buy a book. Now, after an awkward, frustrating day of once again trying to do things one-handed, he had the long walk to the tube station to look forward to, then the crowded train ride with his arm in a bloody sling, and then *another* long walk in the pouring rain to his home. He sighed, shutting down his laptop and actually considering closing the shop early.

The door opening and sound of the bell brought his head up guiltily until he saw who it was. “Gil,” he said in surprise.

“Arthur, me lad.” Gilbert grinned, looking pleased with himself. “Thought you might appreciate a ride home.”

Mentally pumping his fist in triumph, Arthur only said dryly, “Actually, I was rather looking forward to a twenty minute slog in the cold, pouring rain. Yes, I *would* like a ride home, you prat, thank you.” At Gilbert’s smirk, he nodded at the shop. “Just give me a few minutes to close up.”

Gilbert wandered around, hands in his pockets, as Arthur locked his desk and put some papers into his messenger bag. “Need me to do anything while I’m here? Carry some heavy objects, climb ladders, slice things open...?”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “You’ve been talking to Alfred.”

“To hear him tell it, you nearly sliced your thumb off with a Stanley knife trying to open boxes one-handed.” He wagged his finger. “Naughty-naughty.”

“Oh, shut it. The only reason I ‘nearly sliced off my thumb’ at all is because he sneaked up behind me and then screamed like a little girl when he saw what I was doing.” He could admit the whole box-opening process had been a bit awkward, but he’d managed to anchor the boxes between his knees while slicing them open. It hadn’t been pretty, but it had mostly

worked. Until Alfred had yelled in his ear, causing his hand to slip and nearly have a nasty accident.

“No, everything has been nicely taken care of thanks to everyone stopping by.” Arthur was still a little surprised and warmed by all the unsolicited help he’d received over the last few weeks while his left arm had been out of commission. “Matthew comes by regularly to bring my inventory up to date so I don’t have to peck one-handed on my laptop. Alfred has been by almost every day to do lifting and carrying and fetching things for me because apparently I’m no longer allowed on ladders.”

Gilbert snorted. “Not until you’ve got two functioning arms anyhow. Then we’ll find you one with safety rails and use that thing you’ve got for firewood.”

“Even Kiku stopped by.” Arthur smiled at the memory. “Brought me some lovely tea.”

“And here’s my awesome self to drive you home so you don’t have to walk in the rain.”

“So you are. As I said, I’ve certainly been nicely looked after.”

“Francis around?” Gilbert asked casually.

Gilbert didn’t ask casual questions, and Arthur ignored the underlying tone. “No, he’s on his way to Scotland for a few days. Some resort in the Highlands with a restaurant the magazine wants him to review.

“What a shame,” the other man answered cheerfully. “He won’t be able to join us for dinner tomorrow night then.”

Arthur looked up from locking his desk. “What dinner?”

“Matt’s birthday. Kiku told him about this Japanese restaurant across town, and now he wants to try it out. I thought we’d all get together for a birthday dinner for him. You, me, Alfred, and of course, the birthday boy. Kiku wanted to come too, but he has family in town and he doesn’t think he’ll be able to make it. You in?”

“Yes, of course.” He paused. “You like Matthew, don’t you?”

Gilbert’s face lit up. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I do. He’d kind of shy, you know, so I’ve been going a little slow, but I think...”

When he trailed off rather wistfully, Arthur said, “He seems quite taken with you, and he’s a lovely lad.” He didn’t miss the look of relief that crossed Gilbert’s face, but based on their long history and his knowledge of Gilbert’s past relationships, he said levelly, “Don’t blow it.”

Gilbert grimaced, but nodded and ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah. I really, really want this to work.”

Arthur gave him a pat on the arm as he walked past him and pulled out his keys. “Whatever you’re doing, seems to be working. Just keep it up.”

“Right. So, I’ll pick you up tomorrow at seven.” He flashed a grin. “Wear something nice.”

As they stepped outside and Arthur locked the door, he replied, “Now you sound like Francis.” And he hid his smile at the sound of choking behind him.

The evening was clear and thankfully free of rain. As soon as Arthur stepped out of the car onto the sidewalk, he carefully pulled his sling over his head and tucked it into his jacket pocket.

“Ah, should you be doing that?” Alfred asked dubiously. “It’s still broken, you know.”

“They told me an hour or two without the sling won’t hurt at this point,” Arthur told him, “as long as I’m careful, and I really would like to enjoy this meal without having to deal with it.”

“Yeah, okay,” Alfred conceded, “but part of the reason to keep it in a sling is to remind you it’s broken and not to try to pick things up with it.”

“Oh, I think the cast on my arm will remind me well enough of that,” Arthur told him dryly. “Now, shall we stop talking about my arm and start celebrating Matthew’s birthday?”

Alfred held his hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay. Said all I’m going to say on the subject.” He gave a blinding smile. “Let’s eat!”

Alfred was dressed quite nicely, and Arthur realized he hadn’t really seen him dressed up in a jacket and dress shirt before; when he stopped by the shop or they went to the pub or just hung out together he was always in casual clothes, sweatshirts or t-shirts and jeans, and his old bomber jacket when it was cold. Tonight he was wearing a navy jacket and a blue shirt that really brought out the blue in his eyes. He would have looked like a proper English gentleman if not for the Superman tie he was wearing. Still, he looked most handsome tonight, and Arthur, to his mortification, had actually blurted something to him about how nice he looked when Alfred had come into the shop to help him close up that evening. Alfred’s eyes had lit up and he gave Arthur a blinding smile, and then had turned all bashful, pointing out that Arthur had worn that green sweater that brought out his eyes. So he had, and perhaps he’d thought about Alfred’s earlier comments about that sweater when he’d dressed that day.

As they moved across the small parking lot to the restaurant, Arthur smiled as he saw Matthew slip his hand into Gilbert’s. He really hoped this worked out for them; from what he could see, Gilbert was actually good for the shy Matthew, and he could already see that Gilbert was a lot calmer, thanks to Matthew’s influence. Alfred had seen Gilbert through many failed relationships – relationships he had never really put that much effort into – and he saw that this one was different. Gilbert really wanted this to work, and he really wanted it to work for him.

He was looking around idly as they walked, but he then suddenly stopped, staring at a vehicle parked beside the restaurant. The others had walked ahead, not noticing he was still standing there in the parking lot.

Alfred noticed first, and he stopped and looked back. “Arthur? Something wrong?”

Arthur’s mouth had gone dry, and he had to work to swallow. “Would you ...” It came out a whisper, and he coughed and tried again. “Would you please wait here a moment?” And without waiting for an answer, he strode past them into the restaurant.

Alfred stared as Arthur disappeared into the restaurant. “What the hell was that about?”

Gilbert frowned, then turned, visually scanning the parking lot. Alfred saw his face twitch before he let go of Matthew’s hand, gave him an apologetic touch on the arm, then walked quickly over to a black Nissan parked near the building. Gilbert peered inside for a moment, and Alfred saw his spine stiffen. When he turned around, his mouth was set in a tight line, and under the street light, Alfred could see his eyes fairly burn with anger.

Alfred asked, “Gilbert, what the fuck?” at the same time Matthew asked, “What is it?”

“That’s Francis’s car.”

“I thought Francis was in Scotland,” Matthew said hesitantly.

“So did Arthur.”

“Oh, no.” Alfred could feel his heart drop into his stomach. He remembered asking Gilbert if he thought Francis cheated on Arthur, and he wondered if that’s what was going on inside.

“Maybe his plans changed,” Matthew ventured, but he didn’t sound like he believed it.

“More like he didn’t expect Arthur to show up here,” Gilbert said, his voice a low growl. He pulled out a cigarette, glared at it, then stuffed it back into the pack. “Fuck it.” With a determined stride, he walked up to the restaurant.

Matthew gasped, “Gilbert, you can’t go in there!”

Alfred was torn. Part of him wanted to charge into the restaurant to support Arthur if Francis *was* in there (and punching him in the face would be a nice bonus), but part of him knew he needed to stay out of it and be ready to support Arthur as a friend in any aftermath. He’d long known that he’d fallen in love with the British bookshop owner, but he liked to believe he was honorable enough not to act on those feelings while Arthur was in a relationship. He also liked to believe that Arthur thought of him as more than a friend too, but he couldn’t be sure, and he didn’t want to wreck the wonderful friendship they did have by making any stupid moves. Not for the first time, it was tearing him apart.

Gilbert, who had stopped when Matthew spoke up, began walking again. “No, but I can look through the window.” He looked at Matthew and said in a softer voice, “I have to know he’s okay, Matt. And if I think he needs me, I’m going in.” He did wait until Matthew gave him a nod, then went over to the window and peered in. Alfred was right beside him. He had to know too.

As luck would have it, they had a clear view of what was going on, and Alfred heard Gilbert swear viciously under his breath. Francis was indeed inside, sitting at a table with a stunning brunette. Or, Alfred thought with a stab of anger, it might be more accurate to say Francis was *wearing* a stunning brunette. Even with Arthur standing right there in front of him, spine stiff, shoulders squared, the woman was draped over Francis. They couldn't see Arthur's face, but it wasn't hard to read his body language. The woman was talking, and Francis was apparently trying to get her to stop, when Arthur suddenly spun on his heel and left, and the look on his face was enough to break Alfred's heart.

Francis shot to his feet and followed, his long legs eating up the distance to catch up with Arthur. Gilbert, Alfred and Matthew were all standing by the restaurant and instinctively tried to stay in the shadows and out of the way. Alfred could hear Matthew whispering under his breath, "I don't want to be here, I don't want to be here, I don't want to be here..."

Alfred was about to suggest they go inside the restaurant to give Arthur his privacy when Francis finally caught up to Arthur and reached out to snag his arm and make him stop. Alfred saw it happening as if in slow motion and was powerless to stop it. Bonnefoy grabbed his left arm, and Alfred could hear Arthur's surprised gasp of pain from where he was standing. The next thing he knew, he was standing between Francis and Arthur, and his hands were on Francis' chest, giving him a shove that sent him stumbling back.

"He's got a broken arm, you dumbass," he snarled.

Francis looked startled and a flash of chagrin crossed his face, but then he recovered and gave Alfred a look of intense dislike. "Oh, it's your American hero, Arthur, here to save the day." He moved back until he was in Alfred's personal space. "Stay out of this, Jones. This is not your business."

"Maybe I'm making it my business --"

"Alfred." A touch on his arm stopped him instantly. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then turned to look at Arthur. "It's all right." The other man gave his head a little jerk, and Alfred reluctantly moved away.

He could see Gilbert not far off, Matthew's hand on his arm, and he jammed his fists into his pockets, hoping that did the trick.

"Was she the only one, Francis? Or were there others?" Arthur's voice was low and would have sounded calm if Alfred couldn't hear the waver in it.

Francis ran a hand through his hair, then huffed. "Does it matter?"

"Do you mean, does it matter if you cheated on me with one person or a dozen? No, I suppose not." Arthur may have thought he had his features under control, but Alfred could see the hurt in his eyes, and Gilbert could probably see his hands shaking from where he was standing.

Suddenly, Arthur stepped forward, giving Francis no choice but to look directly at him. "How long, Francis?" he demanded. "How long have you been lying to me, and cheating on me,

and then coming home and fucking me like it meant something?”

Francis’ mouth tightened and he whispered harshly, “I will not have this conversation with you out here on the sidewalk like common trash.” He lifted his chin and indicated the others. “And I certainly will not have it in front of your...friends.”

But Arthur didn’t move. “How long, Francis? At least be honest about that and answer the bloody question.”

Francis was silent for a long time, then looked away. “Nine, ten months,” he answered finally.

“My god,” Arthur breathed, gripping his hair with one hand as he took an involuntary step back. “What a fool I’ve been.”

“Oh, do not act the injured party with me, Arthur,” Francis snapped. “You think I do not know about you and this American?”

“Alfred is my *friend*. We haven’t done anything.”

“A blind man could see that he’s in love with you.”

Then Arthur did an odd thing. He stepped between Francis and Alfred as if he would protect Alfred somehow from Francis’ spite. “Don’t you *dare* drag him into this,” he said, his voice tight with anger. “Alfred has done nothing except be a good friend to me.”

Francis looked at him with a mixture of pity and contempt. “And only you, *ma petite sotte*, could fail to realize that you are in love with him.”

Arthur took a deep breath and released it slowly. “Who said I failed to realize it?”

Alfred felt something catch in his chest, and his fists were clenched so tightly they were beginning to hurt.

“But while we – while I *thought* we were in a committed relationship, I wouldn’t have acted on those feelings, Francis.”

“Of course not, because you are Arthur the Martyr,” Francis sneered. “Do you have any idea how pleasant it is to live with a martyr? I’ve always known you didn’t think you deserved happiness, and now I think perhaps you are right. You would not know what to do with happiness if it were handed to you. You *enjoy* your misery.”

Arthur flinched like he’d been slapped, and as far as Alfred was concerned, that was all she wrote. His fist was out of his pocket and he took a step around Arthur, arm drawn back. But Gilbert neatly stepped in, his own fist ready, and laid out Francis on the sidewalk with one hard punch to his jaw. As he looked down at Francis and rubbed his knuckles, he said cheerfully, “Sorry, Al. I know that was your shot, but I’ve been wanting to do that for-fucking-ever. And you know what? It felt great.” He leaned over where Francis was rubbing the side of his face, looking dazed. “Was it good for you too, Francis?” he asked innocently.

“*Merde*,” Francis groaned. Then he looked up at Arthur. “So you have your friends do your fighting for you.”

Still reeling from the shock of the last few minutes, Arthur gave his head a little shake. “I’m not going to fight with you, Francis,” he said, sounding utterly drained. “I’m going to a hotel tonight. When I get back to my place tomorrow, I expect you to be gone. And leave your key.”

“Will you call off your thugs and allow me to get to my feet?” Francis asked sourly.

Alfred looked at Gilbert and Matthew, and as one, they turned their back on Francis and gathered around Arthur. Arthur didn’t need their protection, but it still made Alfred feel better to have that wall between him and Francis. They heard scuffling as Francis got to his feet, and then his footsteps sounding on the pavement as he walked away.

Arthur took a shaky breath. “Matthew, I must apologize for ruining your birthday dinner. I’ll take a taxi and –“

Before either Gilbert or Alfred could step in, it was Matthew who took charge in his quiet, competent manner. “Please don’t apologize, Arthur. This wasn’t your fault, and we can have dinner anytime.” The corner of Arthur’s sling was poking out of his pocket, and Matthew pulled it out, slipping it over Arthur’s head and gently guiding his arm into it. “I don’t think you should be alone tonight,” he continued. “Why don’t you go home with Gilbert and try to get some rest. Then tomorrow – if you want us to – Alfred and I will come over.”

Arthur still looked a little dazed and in shock, but he nodded, perhaps grateful for someone taking the weight of decision-making away from him for the evening.

Gilbert moved up beside him and slid an arm around his shoulders, tousling his hair. “That’s the ticket. You come home with me, *mein kleiner bruder*.” Then he rested his forehead against Arthur’s in a way that reminded Alfred that these two had been friends since childhood. “We’ll get shit-faced,” he said softly, his tone fond. “Be just like old times.”

Arthur spluttered, and although Alfred could see the shine of tears in his eyes, he managed a rueful smile. “That sounds like a brilliant idea.”

Gilbert turned to Matthew, who said firmly, “We’ll take the Tube back to my place,” and gave Gilbert a look that Alfred couldn’t interpret, but Gilbert nodded his understanding, and he guided Arthur to his car with an arm around his shoulder.

Alfred couldn’t stop the automatic step he made to follow, but Matthew wrapped a hand around his arm. “Let them go, Al,” he said gently. “For tonight.”

“But –“ Alfred anxiously searched his cousin’s face. “Did he say – didn’t he say - ?”

Matthew chuckled softly and gently slapped the back of Alfred’s head. “Al, you have to be the only person on this island who doesn’t realize Arthur’s in love with you.”

It was a long night for Alfred. He couldn't settle down to anything, just kept jittering around Matthew's apartment until his cousin sat him down in front of the TV with a game controller. The two of them played video games until almost four in the morning. Or rather, Alfred played until nearly four in the morning; Matthew had fallen asleep long ago with the controller in his hands, snoring softly.

Since Matthew was conked out on the floor – and wasn't he going to be bitching about that tomorrow morning – Alfred felt no real guilt at crawling up on the sofa after carefully placing his glasses on the coffee table, and finally giving up the fight against sleep.

It was the sound of Matthew's voice that woke him. He blinked his eyes open, rubbed a hand over his face, then slowly sat up and groped for his glasses on the coffee table. He smelled coffee, and since Matthew's voice was coming from the small kitchen, he let his nose lead him. His cousin was on his cell phone, and Alfred mouthed a quick 'Gil?' that earned a nod in return. Retrieving a cup from the cupboard, he filled it with fresh coffee, then took a long, bracing drink and relaxed back against the counter, unconsciously reacting to Matthew's sense of calmness. Matthew wasn't making any reassuring noises or looking worried or tugging a lock of his hair – a dead giveaway of anxiety since he was a kid – so things must okay. Or as okay as they could be, given what happened last night. Alfred counted it as the best thing that could have happened, but that might be a bit selfish on his part, he allowed. Still, he couldn't help how he felt. He drank his coffee and tried to wait patiently as Matt finished up his phone call and then slipped his cell phone back into his pocket. "Well?" he asked immediately.

"Well. Arthur's okay," Matthew said in his most reassuring tone. Alfred would be lying if he said he didn't appreciate it. "Apparently they didn't even get drunk last night, just spent the whole night talking." Matthew poured himself another cup of coffee and drank in silence for a few moments before saying slowly, "Gil couldn't say a lot about it, but I gather things hadn't been good between Arthur and Francis for a while." He shot Alfred a look with a question in it, as if expecting him to know something.

Alfred debated with himself, decided he could trust his cousin, and nodded. "Okay, but this doesn't go any further than you, right? You can't tell Gil." Matthew's eyebrows raised, but he nodded. "Remember before Arthur broke his arm, there were a couple of times when you and Gil tried to get together with Arthur, I think there was a movie, and our usual night at the pub, and there was something else too, but I can't remember –"

"Yeah, Gil said Arthur kind of blew him off. I mean, he was polite about it, but Gil wondered if Francis wasn't involved somehow."

"More than you know," Alfred muttered under his breath. Then, louder, he said, "Arthur was waiting for the bruises to fade."

Matthew fumbled with his cup, then hurriedly set it on the counter, staring at him in disbelief. "No way. Francis?"

Alfred grimaced. "Arthur said it only happened the once. Frankly, I don't think he saw it coming, or he never would have let it happen."

Matthew let out a deep sigh and he retrieved his cup. “Arthur’s no wilting flower, so I’m sure you’re right, but still. *Jesus*.”

“So, Arthur’s okay?” he prompted.

“They’re over at Arthur’s place. Francis cleaned out his stuff, and apparently the kitchen was his province, so he cleaned that out too. The only thing he left Arthur was his tea.”

“Asshole.”

“Oh yeah. So they’ve asked us to bring over breakfast.”

“Awesome.” Alfred put his empty cup in the sink with a clink. “Let’s go.”

Alfred made Matthew drive blocks out of their way to go to that little bakery near Arthur’s shop, because he knew they made tea just the way Arthur liked it. Mattie didn’t grumble – much – and was mollified when he found Gil’s favorite coffee cake there, and promptly snapped it up.

They hadn’t talked about much of anything important as they made their way to Arthur’s flat, but once they reached Arthur’s landing in the building, Alfred suddenly stopped, and Matthew nearly bumped into him from behind. “Hey, watch it, Al.”

Alfred turned, feeling the first twinges of nervousness now that they were almost there. “Mattie, what am I supposed to do? Pretend like nothing happened? He knows how I feel, I know how he feels...can I, I don’t know, ask him out, or give him a hug or, tell him I’m sorry about Francis, although I’m totally *not*, or –”

“Whoa, whoa, slow down, Al.” Matthew clamped his one free hand on Alfred’s shoulder and squeezed a little. Alfred had never been more grateful for the fact that Mattie had always been the sensible one, the one with the common sense, the one who never got flustered. “You’re his friend, right?”

Alfred nodded vehemently.

“Then just continue being his friend.”

Well, *that* wasn’t what he wanted to hear. He whined, “But –”

“Alfred, Arthur just went through a pretty nasty, *public* break-up. Give him some time and space. The one thing he’s not going to want to do is make another mistake in a relationship, and the last thing you want to do is pressure him. So give him the time to figure it all out.” He gave Alfred’s shoulder a little shake. “Just let it evolve.” He grinned affectionately. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you. Trust me, it’ll evolve.”

Alfred let that sink in and took a couple of steadying breaths. “Okay, okay, I can do that. Be his friend and let it happen. Got it.”

Matthew rolled his eyes as he slipped around him and knocked on Arthur's door. "And *relax*."

It turned out to be both easier and harder than Alfred imagined. His first thought when he saw Arthur was that he wanted to kiss away those dark shadows under his eyes; but when he handed him his perfectly-prepared Earl Grey, he found himself grinning back just like he always did when Arthur's eyes lit up at the prospect of tea.

The atmosphere was more relaxed than he expected it to be, and they all settled down around the kitchen table to breakfast. Alfred couldn't stop himself from surreptitiously looking around to see if he could figure out what might be missing. He didn't see any large, empty holes where furniture was missing, and Arthur's bookshelves were completely filled...

"Most of Francis's things were in the kitchen," Arthur said calmly.

Alfred quickly looked at him, his face warming. "Um, sorry, I was just —"

Arthur waved that away. "It's okay, Alfred. Francis's interest was in food, and so he spent a lot of money furnishing the kitchen to his standards."

"Spent a lot of money furnishing the closets to his standards too," Gilbert added, with a grin. "Too bad he didn't leave any thousand dollar shoes behind."

"You don't wear his size, Gil," Arthur reminded him.

"I don't need to wear his size to sell 'em on eBay."

Alfred hadn't realized his muscles were tense until they relaxed at the sight of Arthur's slight grin. He hadn't given much thought to Gilbert, other than worrying over whether he was good enough for his cousin, but he could see that Arthur spending the night talking to Gilbert had probably been the best thing for him. It was only because he had been studying Gil that he saw the man give Arthur what could only be termed a meaningful look. When he quickly slid his eyes over to Arthur, he saw him give a slight nod.

"So," Gilbert said suddenly, getting to his feet, "we've come up with a shopping list so Arthur has food again. Matt, want to come with? I'm heading over to Tesco's to stock up." He gave Arthur's shoulder a playful nudge. "Arsehole also cleaned out all of Arthur's nice, fluffy towels, so we have to pick up some stuff for his bathroom too. It might take a while."

Whatever was going on, Matthew was apparently clued in, because he nodded agreeably and got to his feet. "Sure thing." As they headed for the door, he called over his shoulder, "We'll call you later. If we're too late, we can either bring back some food or go out for lunch, if you want."

Then they were gone, leaving Arthur and Alfred alone, and Alfred knew this has been orchestrated; for whatever reason, Arthur had arranged to have Gil and Matthew leave so they could be alone. Arthur was running an index finger around the rim of his cup and staring down into whatever liquid was left. Oh god. They were going to Talk. Or rather, Arthur was going to Talk. The only question was, is it going to be a Good Talk (*I want to move our*

relationship to the next level.) or a Bad Talk (Despite what I said to Francis about how I felt about you, I would like us to just remain friends.)

“Alfred.” Arthur’s soft voice jerked Alfred out of his thoughts and he gazed across the table at Arthur, feeling his heartbeat speed up in anxiety. “I hope you don’t mind. I asked Gilbert and Matthew to leave us for a while so we could talk.”

“Kay.” Alfred’s voice came out kind of croaky, and he cleared his throat.

“You’ve been a good friend to me.”

Oh god. *Bad Talk. Bad Talk. Bad Talk.* “And you’ve been a good friend to me,” Alfred said quickly. “I mean, it’s not one-sided here.”

“Of course,” Arthur replied with that small, sweet smile of his.

Okay, maybe it was a Good Talk. Alfred tried to relax a little.

Arthur let out a little sigh. “Sometimes I think that was the first mistake Francis and I made. We met in university; I was first year, and he was second year.” He wrinkled his nose a little ruefully. “When we met...it was just an instant sexual attraction. We didn’t even really get to know one another before we went to bed together. I imagine we both thought it was just going to be a one-night stand or just a fling, but once we were together, we stayed together. But while Francis had his family’s money to pay his bills, I was working two jobs while taking classes, and there was just no time...and I suppose I didn’t think there was any problem as long as things were good in bed and we were getting along. We became exclusive, and I thought there would always be time later.” He shrugged. “It didn’t exactly work out that way. We didn’t really share any interests; my love was always literature and books, and Francis’s was food. I thought perhaps the fact that he wanted to write about food, and I did a fair amount of writing myself, might be something in common for us. But it wasn’t. I tried, but I’m afraid I had no interest in the kind of restaurants Francis spent the majority of his time in, and he had no interest in my bookshop or what I did.” Finally, he raised his eyes and looked at Alfred. “It didn’t leave a lot left for us to talk about.”

Alfred had no idea what his expression must have been, but Arthur’s face softened. “Oh, don’t look so tragic, lad, it wasn’t as bad as all that. We were genuinely happy for a long time. I’m just not certain we actually ever...became friends. I don’t want that to happen to us.”

Good Talk. Good Talk! “It wouldn’t,” Alfred said quickly. “It won’t. I mean, we’re already friends.”

Arthur nodded agreement. “We are,” he said solemnly, then swallowed as the tips of his ears reddened and his gaze slid away, “and as I all but declared my feelings for you yesterday in front of everyone, I was wondering if –“

“Yes!” Alfred all but shouted, then cringed at the volume of his voice. “I mean, I feel the same way.” He gave a little snort of laughter. “Francis got one thing right anyhow.” *Very, very Good Talk! Most awesome Talk ever!*

“Oh.” Arthur’s face pinked up and he looked so adorably pleased that Alfred had to grab hold of the seat of his chair to keep himself there because all he wanted to do was lunge across the table and kiss him senseless. Arthur cleared his throat and took a drink of his tea, then grimaced as it must have gone cold. “I’m glad,” he said, but he looked nervous, skittish, which worried Alfred.

“But...?” he asked tentatively, holding his breath.

“But.”

Oh, god, was this going to turn into a Bad Talk after all?

“I don’t want us to rush into anything,” Arthur said carefully, watching Alfred’s face. “I made that mistake once, and I don’t want to make it again. I’d like us to be friends and just let it –”

“Evolve,” Alfred supplied softly, remembering Mattie’s advice.

Arthur relaxed suddenly, looking unbelievably relieved. “Yes. Yes, that’s it exactly. You think so too?”

“Absolutely. Yes.” Alfred nodded vehemently. “This is too important to screw up.” Then his slid his hand across the table, and waited.

Without hesitation, Arthur slid his hand into his and they sat there gazing at one another. Arthur’s hand was just a bit smaller than his was, but it fit into his perfectly. Alfred felt a little bit like a high school girl on his first date, but he doubted any girl would be grinning as widely as he was. “You know,” he drawled, rubbing his thumb over Arthur’s knuckles, “there’s something I’ve been wanting to do for a long time.”

“And what is that?” Arthur asked, his voice a little huskier than before.

Alfred tilted his head, and gave him the most beguiling smile he could manage. “I’d really, really like to kiss you.”

“Well. I think that could be arranged.”

Alfred was already getting to his feet. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” Arthur stood smoothly and allowed Alfred to gently tug him closer until they were chest to chest. Alfred brought his hand up and gently cupped the side of Arthur’s face, and he felt one of Arthur’s hands rest on his side. Then he dipped his head and Arthur tilted his, and he brought their lips together. It wouldn’t have won any prizes, except maybe it would have because, although it was brief and chaste, it was sweet and it felt like a promise.

One year later

Alfred let himself into the apartment – despite living in London, he was an American, and he’d hang onto his terminology, thank you – and quietly stowed his photography bags when

he saw Arthur dozing on the sofa. Toeing off his shoes, he crossed the floor in his stocking feet and stood by the sofa, gazing down with a soft smile. He never got tired of watching Arthur sleep, but he also never admitted how often he did it because he suspected it could be considered a little creepy. Arthur had fallen asleep while reading, his book resting on his chest and his reading glasses, which he only used when his eyes were really tired, still on his face. Carefully, Alfred lifted them off and set them aside, then brushed the tousled hair aside and placed a kiss on Arthur's forehead.

Arthur wasn't sleeping deeply and he hummed in approval, lifting an arm to hook around Alfred's neck without opening his eyes. Alfred allowed himself to be pulled down into a fully participatory kiss. When they finally parted, Arthur blinked his eyes open and trailed his knuckles down the side of Alfred's face.

"How did the wedding go?" he asked drowsily.

"It was great. They loved the location shots, and for a change the weather cooperated."

"You do have a way of sniffing out all the best backgrounds. No wonder every wedding planner in the UK is trying to book you."

Alfred grinned. If anyone had told him a year ago that he'd enjoy doing wedding photo shoots, he would have told them they were nuts. But he'd been getting bored staying in the studio, and Arthur suggested he look into doing weddings, providing they offered a good challenge. So Kiko had come up with a killer web page for him, he did a little advertising, got a few local weddings, and the word began to spread that Alfred F. Jones was the photographer who knew how to come up with something different for the bride who wanted her wedding photos to be special. And what bride didn't?

Arthur yawned and sat up as Alfred dropped down beside him. "What time is it?"

"Late. As in Late-late."

Arthur frowned. "You shouldn't have driven back then, love. Why didn't you just spend the night there and drive back tomorrow?"

Alfred snuggled closer and began nuzzling his neck. "Didn't wanna. Wanted to be here with you."

"And I want you here with me," Arthur said patiently, "but —"

But, they've had this discussion before, and Alfred always came back after an event, no matter where it was. He didn't want to spend a night in a lonely hotel room without Arthur. "Wasn't tired," he grinned. "Was *wired*."

Arthur spluttered, but settled against him and laid his head on his shoulder. "Why am I not surprised?" One hand rested on Alfred's thigh and gave it a fond pat. "Glad you came back."

Closing his eyes, Alfred drew in a deep breath, reveling in the familiar scent on the man in his arms. "Mmm. Me too."

“Did some more work on the book today.”

“Yeah?” Alfred’s eyes popped open. “Can I see?” he asked eagerly. The book was in its final stages, and Arthur had made the tentative suggestion that Alfred add some prose or poetry to some of the shots. Since it was such a good idea, and it was his idea, Alfred insisted he be the one to tackle it. Arthur had long since confessed to the poetry and children’s stories languishing in his closet that he’d written while in university, and Alfred told him he had every confidence in him. (“And just think, Artie, the book will have both our names in it! A real collaboration!”) After his initial attack of nerves, Arthur had buckled down to the job, and Alfred thought he’d done a brilliant job. And, they had a publisher interested.

“Tomorrow, love. It’s late-late, remember?”

Alfred would have whined, but the jaw-cracking yawn spoiled the effect. “Bed?”

“Bed.”

Alfred got up first, then pulled Arthur up, tugging him close to his side. Arm-in-arm, they walked to the bedroom, passing the framed photo on the living room wall that Alfred had envisioned long ago of Arthur reading in the forest. He still thought it was one of the best photos he’s ever taken, and certainly the one most blessed with serendipity. Not only had the sun pierced the towering trees at just the right angle, at just the right time, to bath Arthur in perfect diffused light, but there was a sparkle of light just over Arthur’s shoulder that he’d never been able to explain. He’d wanted to airbrush it out, but Arthur had touched the little spot of light with something like reverence and refused to let him change it.

Alfred had been happy to let him have anything he wanted, because after much persuasion, he finally got the photo *he* wanted. They passed it every night on the bedroom wall as they went to bed. Arthur could never look at it without blushing to the roots of his hair, but Alfred never got tired of staring at it. It had taken him months to persuade Arthur to do it, and they’d had to do it in the middle of summer because Arthur refused to ‘freeze his bollocks off’ just so Alfred could take a photo. But, oh, what a photo it turned out to be. Alfred had spent a long time searching out the perfect spot, and he’d finally found it: a small stream, a weeping willow tree, enough trees around the border to provide a screen and some shade; all he’d needed to complete the picture was a perfectly nude Arthur Kirkland, a pair of reading glasses, and a book. After much persuasion, that was exactly what he got.

“Will you stop staring at that thing?”

Alfred grinned. “I like what I see.”

“And why,” Arthur suddenly purred into his ear from behind, “would you want to look at that when you can have the real thing?”

“Ha ha!” Alfred turned, his grin widening, first in surprise and then appreciation. “Looks like I have some catching up to do.” Arthur didn’t usually – make that ever – parade around in the nude, but he was posing now, with intent, although he looked a little embarrassed at being so bold. Alfred rested his hands at Arthur’s waist, and slowly slid his hands up and down.

“You’re gorgeous.”

Arthur's face immediately blossomed red and he looked down at his feet. "Don't be ridiculous," he muttered.

"Not being ridiculous. I'm a professional; I know gorgeous when I see it."

Arthur looked up at him through his eyelashes; if he ever realized how that turned Alfred's heart to mush, it would be really, really embarrassing. But it was the look in Arthur's eyes that made the breath suddenly catch in Alfred's chest. Reaching up, Arthur trailed his knuckles gently down the side of Alfred's face. "And you are my dearest love."

The breath left Alfred's body as if it had been squeezed out. He stared at Arthur, who was gazing back at him, eyes wide, his own breath a little fast. They'd both said it before, but usually in bed, usually in the breathless aftermath of sex. In a flash, Alfred understood why Arthur, usually the one so modest when it came to displaying his body, had literally stripped away everything in order to tell him this.

With something that sounded suspiciously like a sob, Alfred crushed the smaller man to his body and hugged him hard, burying his face in his neck. "You brave bastard," he sniffed, feeling water gather at the corner of his eyes. "How in the hell am I supposed to follow *that*?"

Arthur chuckled softly and soothed him with a hand stroking down his back. "I'm sure you'll think of something."

When Alfred finally stopped hiding his face in Arthur's neck and pulled back, Arthur gently thumbed away a stray tear. He caught Arthur's hand afterward and pressed a kiss into his palm, then looked him in the eye. "You're my best friend," he said steadily, "and I love you, and when I wake up in the mornings I can't believe how fuckin' lucky I am."

Alfred didn't think he'd ever seen Arthur look so positively happy, green eyes sparkling, lips curved in a pleased smile, and his whole body radiating contentment. As for himself, he felt like he'd swallowed a piece of the sun, and warmth radiated from his chest to the tips of his fingers and toes. And then he realized, "This is it, isn't it?" he asked suddenly, hope blossoming. They'd been so careful with each other over the last year, Alfred in particular. He didn't do anything that he thought might make Arthur feel pressured. But now... He rested his forehead against Arthur's, whispering, "This is where we say, we're in it for the long haul, right? No doubts, no reservations--"

"No doubts," Arthur confirmed. "No reservations." He took a breath and then said, "For the rest of our lives."

"The rest of our lives," Alfred repeated, his eyes sliding shut briefly in satisfaction. "Yeah, that sounds pretty much perfect to me." He bounced a little on his toes. "Give me a sec to get naked, and we'll seal the deal."

"Oh, you sweet talker, you."

Alfred fumbled with his clothes, and they laughed as they stumbled toward the bed, exchanging touches and sweet kisses. They'd found their happiness, and this was the ever-after they had both been hoping for.

Best. Talk. *Ever.*

End

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